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ABSTRACT

The first section of this paper discusses the writing crisis as it applies to education in journalism and offers examples of writing by college students and faculty members to illustrate the depth of the crisis. It cites, however, a recent survey showing that journalism schools across the United States are increasing the emphasis on writing skills in their news-editorial curricula. The second section of the paper contains an annotated bibliography of materials aimed at the improvement of student writing in journalism programs. The 69 entries in the bibliography are drawn from periodicals, newspapers, books, ERIC documents, and unpublished papers appearing between 1972 and 1979. (FL)

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THE NEED FOR IMPROVEMENT OF BASIC LANGUAGE SKILLS IN EDUCATION FOR JOURNALISM: A BIBLIOGRAPHY

Compiled and Annotated

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"You teach journalists not what
but how to think and write.
The art of lucid writing
remains unchanged,
and insights into the inner workings
of the human condition
are timeless."

--Eric Hoffer

(AEJ Newsletter April 15, 1980)

In its issue of December 8, 1975, Newsweek devoted its cover to somebody whom no reader recognized--except, perhaps, the cover persons's own family and friends. Newsweek's non-celebrity was an unidentified student, shown struggling at his desk. Across a part of that scene, and the cover of the magazine, was printed this question:

Why Can't Johnny Write?

That cover and related article, appearing in a national magazine of such prominence and readership, focused the entire country's attention upon a bad situation that had been developing for many years, was creating serious problems for schools and departments of journalism throughout the country, and continues today.

With members of their own faculties complaining that they have to spend an inordinate percentage of time teaching elementary writing skills, schools and departments have reacted by experimenting with tests designed to identify and/or screen out students deficient in basic skill, diagnose problems for treatment in "crash" or remedial instruction projects, and also strengthen courses devoted to the development of journalistic capacities for handling our language akillfully.

The pressure for more effective teaching of composition, grammar, spelling, and other fundamentals is compounded by news and other media of mass communication professionals deploring the inability of journalism graduates to write as skillfully as they should.

At last spring's meeting of the board of directors of the Associated Press Broadcasters, for example, "there was a lengthy discussion of journalism

education," it was reported (page 5, News from APB, April, 1980), "with most of the board expressing great concern about the decreasing linguistic skills of graduates."

"It seems there is more and more emphasis on the mechanical and technical aspects of news gathering," Ralph Renick, APB's president, observed in his report to other members of the board (page 4), "and less and less emphasis on writing....."

On the other hand, Warren K. Agee found increased emphasis on basic writing skills in a 1977 survey of trends in news-editorial curricula (report in Journalism Educator, October 1977) around the country. Also, AEJ has had a language skills committee for three years now and has sponsored special activities at the past two conventions of the association. Moreover, a committee of the American Council on Education has been examining ways to encourage journalism schools to adopt higher standards for English composition, grammar and spelling to make their graduates better writers (1979 convention report of the American Newspaper Publishers Association, page 45).

Furthermore, intensive and extensive discussions of modern education's "crisis in the teaching of writing" have been conducted the past few years at both spring and summer meetings of the AEJ-American Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation cooperative committee and also at "summit" conferences attended by representatives of journalism education committees of professional organizations in journalism.

In the preparation for one convention of one of the leading associations in the field, the following resolution was submitted:

> Whereas, the basic language skills of journalism school entrants are often deficient, through no fault of their own, and
>
> Whereas, schools of journalism are often forced to neglect other areas of needed education to provide remedial training in such skills, and

Whereas, such instruction reduces the amount of time available for advanced study, depriving journalism students of a part of their education, and

Whereas, the need for remedial instruction in basic language skills is not only an imposition upon schools of journalism, but an unfair burden upon the nation's taxpayers, and

Whereas, deficiencies in the basic language skills of journalism students represent a failure of schools on the elementary, secondary and junior college level,

Be it therefore resolved, that members of the Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi, begin a concerted effort to focus public attention on the need for better education in the basic skills of our language.

Be it further resolved, that local schools failing to provide adequate instruction in such skills be made the subjects of extensive journalistic investigation and the reasons for their failure exposed as a public service.

Meantime, evidence of the need for still more attention continues to accumulate--items, for example, like this one from the pages of a Philadelphia newspaper:

GUD SPELERS WANTED

The first issue of this semester's Temple University News yesterday carried an ad for paid staff positions on the student newspaper. Under the listing for copy editor, the ad said, "Must have good command of grammer, spelling and punctuation."

When we pointed out to news editor Greg Hamilton that 'grammar' had been misspelled, he answered with the obvious--'That's why we need a copy editor.'

Students are not alone, of course, in their linguistic ills, as the following newspaper item reveals:

THE SENTENCE THAT WOULD NOT DIE

The.....Faculty Senate has tried to organize students into something of a cohesive pressure group by urging them to write to legislators about the budget stalemate. We have in our possession a faculty-senate memo.....that asks faculty members to light a fire under students to write letters. The memo includes this note: 'It may be advisable for the faculty member to proofread quickly the letters so as to avoid any embarrassing illiteracy.'

The person who wrote that need go no further than the preceding paragraph in the memo to see an 'embarrassing' example of English composition. With this epic run-on sentence:

'In view of.,...University's worsening financial crisis, we are requesting each faculty member on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, Nov. 16, 17 and 18, and Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, Nov. 21, 22, and 23, to ask his students to select the names of three legislators from the following list, and after a short discussion on what the letters should contain (the Republicans and Democrats should find a way to work out their differences and if this involves a tax increase that they would support a tax increase), have his students write letters to these individuals (either during or after class).'

Got that?

Illustrating the depth of our "crisis" dramatically was this poster that appeared last spring at an Eastern school:

YOUR CAN STUDY IN WASHINGTON NEXT SUMMER

_____ University's School of Communications and Theater

Offers their second annual 6-week seminar

on Communications & Public Policy

Noting such things coming from their elders, the editors of a university newspaper printed this announcement of a "Proposal Writer's Workshop" to be conducted at "Tverpwyck" university.

A pilot study of 18,703 proposals written by tenured full professors at accredited universities revealed that 58 percent of them write more poorly than fifth graders. A more detailed follow-up study used the national average fifth grade reading and writing test scores as criteria of literacy. The results of this study showed that:

42 percent of the professors were able to read but could not write.

69 percent of the professors were able to write but could not read.

31 percent could neither read or write.

Only 12 percent could read and write above the fifth grade level.

The Proposal Writers' Workshop will be a modest, one-week effort to improve the writing skills of 20 tenured full professors at accredited universities.

This workshop is supported by a grant of $28,000 from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Some of the language problems of those who presumably are teaching today's students to write better were explored last spring in the following article in an Eastern newspaper:

MULTI-SYLLABIC ILLITERACY

Do wrods like interface, dysfunction and modal give you the heebie-jeebies? Or after brushing your teeth, do you describe the whole thing as your having 'utilized an effective decay preventive dentifrice in a conscientiously applied program of oral hygiene and regular professional care?'

If you are among the latter, then there may be a big future for you as a writer in scholarly journals. At least that is the finding of J. Scott Armstrong, an associate professor of management at Penn's Wharton School, who says, 'The harder the journal was to read, the higher its prestige was ranked.' Armstrong has written an uncharacteristically readable paper on the subject in a scholarly journal. Armstrong found that academics rated the research of a difficult-to-read paper higher than they did the same research more clearly stated. He gave examples of laborious writing to explain a simple idea. Here is part of a sentence he cided:

'...to increase the probability of keeping a customer in queue, the server should attempt to influence the customer's initial subjective estimate of the mean service time to give him the impression that it is small...'

Translation: 'A customer is more likely to remain in line if you can get him to think he won't have a long wait.'

Why the obfuscation? Well, Armstrong blames part of it on the pressure academics are under to publish research papers. Also, some writers use sesquipedalian vocabularies full of impenetrable jargon and convoluted syntax because people tend to think that writers who use big words and long sentences are smart. 'It looks more solid if it's hard to read,' Armstrong surmises. 'Most people think it must be difficult ideas he's dealing with if it's hard to read.'

Armstrong feels that academics would have much to gain by studying 'The Elements of Style,' by William Strunk and E. B. White.

From such criticism--and attempts to improve the situation that provoked it--has grown a literature of its own. It is not, yet, an extensive body of knowledge. Nor is it a "scientific" literature. Nevertheless, it possesses great heuristic potential and contains many observations and perspectives that are helpful.

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